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'NURSERIES OF HEAVEN': SAMUEL STENNETT ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Matthew D. Haste

The Baptist pastor, Samuel Stennett, wrote a popular family handbook, Discourses on Domestic Duties (1783), which one contemporary suggested should be read in every Christian home on an annual basis. This article provides an overview, placing a particular emphasis on the way Stennett envisioned how godly homes serve as 'nurseries of heaven.'

When the eminent John Gill preached the funeral sermon for his fellow Baptist minister Joseph Stennett II (1692–1758) on February 26, 1758, he paused near the end of his message to address the pastor's grieving family. 'What shall I say? The stroke upon you is heavy; the providence is very afflicting. The loss of such an indulgent husband, tender father, kind brother, amiable relation, and loving friend is a great one indeed!'¹ He then exhorted the family to ground their grief in the hope of the resurrection, 'Remember what is your loss, is his gain; and that you will see your husband, your father, your brother, your relation, and your friend again, to greater advantage than ever you saw or enjoyed him here.'² Among those in the audience who would anticipate that joyful reunion was one of Joseph's sons, Samuel, who would follow his father into pastoral ministry and publish the most significant Baptist work on marriage and family in the eighteenth century. This paper will examine Stennett's vision for the home as a means of commending it to contemporary readers.

Samuel Stennett (1727–1795) was a fourth-generation pastor in the Seventh-day Baptist denomination.³ His great-grandfather, Edward Stennett (d. 1691), was a wealthy physician who pastored a congregation

¹ John Gill, 'The Mutual Gain of Christ and Christians in their Life and Death. Occasioned by the Death of the Reverend Joseph Stennett, D. D.,' in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts in Two Volumes* (London: George Keith, 1773), 1: p. 550.

² Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 1: p. 551.

³ The biographical sketch that follows is drawn from the following sources: William Jones, 'Some Account of the Life and Writings of the Author' in *The Works of Samuel Stennett* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1824), 1: pp. v–xxxviii; Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton, 1830), 4: pp. 351–64; B.A. Ramsbottom, 'The Stennetts' in *British Particular Baptists 1638–1910* (ed. Michael A.G. Haykin; Springfield, Miss.: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1: pp. 132–44; J.H.Y. Briggs, 'Samuel Stennett' in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (ed. Donald M. Lewis; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 2: pp. 1047; S.L. Copson, 'Stennett, Samuel (1728–1795)' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ed. H.G.C. Matthew and Brian Harrison; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 52: p. 403; and B.A. Ramsbottom, *Sing Aloud in Jesus'*

that met in his own castle. The epitaph for Edward and his wife suggests that, among other things, the eldest Stennett passed on a legacy of godly marriage.⁴ The son of this 'holy and happy pair,' Joseph Stennett I (1663–1713), pastored the Baptist Church at Pinners' Hall and wrote a number of influential hymns.⁵ His son, also named Joseph, was the pastor of the Baptist congregation at Little Wild Street in Lincoln's Inn Fields for nearly twenty years, earning a reputation as both an eloquent preacher and an ardent patriot.⁶ Long before John Gill preached at this Joseph Stennett's funeral, he also presided over his ordination service. Thus, Samuel Stennett was blessed with a godly heritage of faithful ministers, who impacted the British Particular Baptists for over a century.

However, as one biographer was quick to point out, Samuel Stennett's prominence 'was not a borrowed lustre, reflected from the virtues of his progenitors.'⁷ Rather, his character 'beamed forth its native goodness' to all who knew him.⁸ Stennett was known for his sharp mind and gentlemanly demeanor. His impressive gifts caught the attention of the King's College

Name: Some Lesser Known Hymnwriters (Stotfold, UK: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2005), pp. 35–38.

⁴ The epitaph read: 'Here lies an holy and happy pair; As once in grace, they now in glory share. They dared to suffer, but they feared to sin, And meekly bore the cross the crown to win; So lived, as not to be afraid to die; So died, as heirs of immortality.' Ramsbottom, 'The Stennetts,' pp. 135–136.

⁵ The great Baptist hymnist Isaac Watts unapologetically drew certain phrases from Stennett's work. Ramsbottom, 'The Stennetts,' p. 137.

⁶ Ramsbottom related a story of Stennett's influence for patriotic causes and also noted that 'he was very friendly with various of the most eminent persons in England in his day.' Ramsbottom, 'The Stennetts,' p. 139.

⁷ This statement is attributed to a Dr Winters, who penned a brief sketch of Stennett's character for the Protestant Dissenter's Magazine following his death that is quoted in Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxi–xxvii.

⁸ Dr Winters, quoted in Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxi. A survey of the descriptions given to him at his various memorial sermons further illustrates his reputation. Joseph Jenkins (1743–1819), whom Stennett baptised and trained in ministry, preached his funeral sermon while Abraham Booth (1734–1806) addressed the crowd at his interment. These two addresses were published together as Joseph Jenkins, *The Love of the Brethren, proceeding from a Perception of the Love of God: A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Samuel Stennett, D.D.... Together with the Address at the Interment by Abraham Booth* (London: Bye and Law, 1795). Several other friends and colleagues preached memorial sermons in Stennett's honour and later published them as follows: John Evans, *A Sermon Preached at Worship-Street, Shoreditch, October 18, 1795; Being a Sincere Tribute of Respect to the Memory of the Rev. Samuel Stennett, D.D., the Rev. Andrew Kippis, D.D., and the Rev. Rice Harris, D.D.* (London: C. Whittingham, 1795); Daniel Turner, *The Gracious Presence of God, the Chief Joy of His People, Considered in a Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Samuel Stennett, D.D.* (Oxford: R. Watts, 1795); Dan Taylor, *A Good Minister of Jesus Christ.*

in Aberdeen, which granted him a Doctor of Divinity in 1763. His written works earned him public acclaim throughout England and a number of his hymns, particularly 'Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned' and 'On Jordan's Stormy Banks,' are still sung today.⁹

Stennett was also committed to his local congregation. When he succeeded his father as pastor of the Particular Baptist church at Little Wild Street in 1758, he had already served the church as an assistant pastor for over ten years and had been a faithful member since his conversion.¹⁰ For the remainder of his own life, Stennett faithfully cared for this flock, 'exhorting, warning, comforting, and directing [them]... administering the ordinances with striking solemnity, expounding the word of God in a pleasing and familiar manner...and maintaining order in all their assemblies.'¹¹

In his day, he was a man of many social connections, some of them quite prominent.¹² It was said that King George III was an intimate friend who visited Stennett's home at Muswell Hill frequently.¹³ Stennett

A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Samuel Stennett, D.D. (London: n.p., 1795).

⁹ Stennett's most influential publications include: *Sermons on Personal Religion* (1770), *Discourses on the Parable of the Sower* (1787), *Discourses on Divine Authority and the Various Use of the Holy Scriptures* (1790), and *Discourses on Domestic Duties* (1783), which will be discussed in detail below. Each of these volumes are available in *The Works of Samuel Stennett*, 3 vols., (London, 1824). In addition, Stennett authored nearly forty hymns, many of which appeared in the popular collection known as *Rippon's Selection*. For a hymn related to the present subject, see 'Children Dying in their infancy in the Arms of Jesus' in John Rippon, *Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors. An Appendix to Dr. Watt's Psalms and Hymns* (London, 1815), p. 556.

¹⁰ There is no precise date available for Stennett's conversion but his biographers related that he was baptised by his father as a young man. Jones also noted that one of his hymns, 'Praise for Conversion,' is likely somewhat autobiographical in nature. Jones included the full text of this hymn in Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. viii.

¹¹ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xiii. For an overview of the Particular Baptist denomination during the eighteenth century, see Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the 18th Century* (vol. 2 of *A History of the English Baptists*, ed. B.R. White; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986).

¹² Several of his eulogisers marvelled at Stennett's social connections and ability to relate to different segments of society. For example, Jenkins recalled, 'In many a wretched apartment in this city have I been with him, when he has wept over the sick and dying...and yet, if called upon, he was so perfectly at ease in the higher circles of life, that respectable personages, in honourable stations and of noble rank, have sought and thought themselves honoured by his friendship.' Jenkins, *Love of the Brethren*, p. 31.

¹³ This information is recorded in various places. For example, see Reuben Aldridge Guild, *The Life, Times, and Correspondence of James Manning and the Early*

corresponded with James Manning, President of Rhode Island College (now Brown University), and encouraged the efforts of the college through his relationship with Morgan Edwards (1722–1795), whom he trained in theology before Edwards moved to America.¹⁴ The famous philanthropist and prison reformer, John Howard (1726–1790), regularly attended his sermons and expressed sincere appreciation for his ministry.¹⁵ When Samuel Davies (1723–1761), a Presbyterian pastor in Virginia who would eventually become the president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), and Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764), the well-known New Jersey preacher who helped spark the colonial Great Awakening, visited England in the 1750s to raise money for the college, Stennett met with them multiple times.¹⁶ His father, Joseph II, contributed to their efforts and introduced them to various distinguished members of London society.¹⁷ It is from Davies' journal that we learn of Stennett's regular Monday evening meetings with Thomas Llewellyn (1720–1783), the pastor of Prescott Street Baptist Church and well-respected tutor, and Thomas Gibbons (1720–1785), an Independent minister and hymn-writer who was a close friend of Isaac Watts (1674–1748).¹⁸

History of Brown University (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1864), p. 120. Stennett preached a sermon after the death of George II, who was said to be a friend of his father, Joseph II. For the sermon, see Samuel Stennett, 'A Sermon on the Death of King George II,' in *Works of Samuel Stennett*, 3: pp. 177–98. Joseph's friendship with George II is mentioned in Champion, 'Social Status of Some 18th-century Baptist Ministers,' p. 12.

¹⁴ For a sample of Manning's correspondence with Stennett, see Guild, *Life of James Manning*, pp. 120–25. Of Stennett's work *Discourses on Domestic Duties*, Manning wrote, 'I highly esteem them. I wish every family were possessed of the book.' Guild, *Life of James Manning*, p. 355.

¹⁵ Howard wrote to Stennett in 1786 to express his gratitude for 'the many, many pleasant hours' he had spent reviewing his notes from Stennett's sermons, which he called 'the songs in the house of my pilgrimage.' For this letter, see 'Letter from Mr. Howard to Dr. Stennett' in *Works of Samuel Stennett*, 3: pp. 459–60. In addition, Stennett preached a memorial sermon in Howard's honour, taking Acts 5:38 as his text—'who went about doing good.' See Samuel Stennett, 'A Sermon on the Death of John Howard, Esq.' in *Works of Samuel Stennett*, 3: pp. 279–300.

¹⁶ See George William Pilcher, *The Reverend Samuel Davies Abroad. The Diary of a Journey to England and Scotland, 1753–1755* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1967), pp. 51, 59, 76, 81, and 120.

¹⁷ Davies remarked of Joseph II: 'He is a judicious, prudent and candid Gent, and has more Influence in Court, than any Dissenting Minister in London.' (Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, p. 51). For an episode highlighting some of the elder Stennett's social connections, see Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, p. 70.

¹⁸ This practice is mentioned in Pilcher, *Davies Abroad*, pp. 58–59. For more on Llewellyn, see Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, 4: pp. 583–85. For more on Thomas Gibbons, see John Handby Thompson, 'Gibbons, Thomas (1720–1785)' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 22: pp. 38–39.

Stennett was thoroughly committed to Baptist principles, but his influence extended into the larger Dissenting community. John Newton (1725–1807) was clearly familiar with his ministry and it appears that John Wesley (1703–1791) knew of him as well.¹⁹ One biographer noted that Stennett's gifts and notoriety could have resulted in a more comfortable station in the Established Church, but 'he chose rather to maintain a good conscience in the sight of God; for he was a Dissenter from *principle*.'²⁰

In his home, he followed the godly example of his faithful forefathers.²¹ His wife, Elizabeth Marsom (1723/24–1795), was described as 'a lady of unaffected piety and good nature' with whom 'he lived in close and uninterrupted affection.'²² According to Jones, Mr and Mrs Stennett's 'regard to the comfort, but especially to the spiritual welfare, of the domestics of their family, was productive of the happiest effect.'²³ Dr Winters contended that 'the serene piety, the cheerful benevolence, the improving intercourse, [and] the generous hospitality' of the Stennett home would be missed by many after their deaths.²⁴

¹⁹ For Newton's mention of Stennett, see *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland, Jr.*, ed. Grant Gordon (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), p. 246. Stennett is referenced briefly by John Wesley and although Wesley did not appear to know him personally, the reference is unique enough to warrant mentioning. On May 23, 1768, Wesley mentioned in a letter to a friend that a rumour had started accusing him of recommending that a man on death row use a crucifix. Wesley wrote, 'I traced this up to its author, Dr. Stennett, an Anabaptist Teacher.' According to Wesley, Stennett visited the man himself and assumed that Wesley had given the crucifix to him during one of his frequent visits. Wesley concluded the matter with obvious frustration: 'Dr. Stennett himself I never yet saw; nor did I ever see such a picture in the cell; and I believe the whole tale is pure invention.' For the full letter, see 'CCX—To the Rev. Mr. Plenderlieth' in *The Works of John Wesley* (3d ed., 1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 12: p. 245.

²⁰ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' 3: p. vii. Italics original.

²¹ According to Jones, 'As a husband, a father, and the master of his family, his deportment was alike upright and exemplary.' Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xv.

²² Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xv. Elizabeth was the daughter of Samuel Marsom, a Baptist minister in Luton, Bedfordshire.

²³ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xv. As evidence of the kind of spirituality that exuded from their home, Jones noted that their son, Joseph, also became a preacher and recounted the story of a young man 'whose conversion was happily brought about by an attendance on his family worship' in the Stennett home.

²⁴ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxii.

When Mrs Stennett died in 1795, her husband sensed that his own end was near.²⁵ After several final months of devoted service to his church, Stennett became fatally ill. In his final days, he shared tender moments with his children, telling Joseph, 'My son, God hath done great things for us. He is very gracious to us, I can leave myself and my family with him.'²⁶ Samuel Stennett fell asleep in the Lord on August 24, 1795.

Discourses on Domestic Duties

For a man so devoted to his family, it is appropriate that one of his most influential works would focus on the home. *Discourses on Domestic Duties* was published in 1783 and earned Stennett high esteem as an author and practical theologian.²⁷ Family handbooks had been popular in English literature since the time of the Puritans and yet, his biographer was able to conclude, 'We know of no writer who either before or since has done such ample justice to the subject in all its bearings.'²⁸ In fact, Jones thought so highly of Stennett's work that he recommended that this collection of sermons be read in every Christian home on an annual basis.²⁹

²⁵ Dr Winters considered Mrs Stennett's death 'an event which [her husband] felt as a man of tender affections, but which he supported with all the dignity of a Christian.' Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxii.

²⁶ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xix.

²⁷ Dr Winters considered Stennett's chief contribution to be his practical works, which he figured 'have been of unspeakable service in the world and especially to the rising generation.' Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxi.

²⁸ Jones, 'Life and Writings of the Author,' p. xxxii. For a brief introduction to family handbooks beginning in the Puritan period, see Anthony Fletcher, 'The Protestant idea of marriage in early modern England' in *Religion, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (ed. Fletcher and Peter Roberts; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 163-165.

²⁹ There are a variety of resources available for study of the family in eighteenth-century England. The author recommends the following as an introduction to the subject: Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, eds., *Family Life in Early Modern Times 1500-1789*, vol. 1 of *The History of the European Family* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); Ralph Houllbrooke, *English Family Life, 1576-1716: An Anthology from Diaries* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); and Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1560-1680* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1982). For a helpful introduction to Baptist thought on the subject at the time, see Michael A.G. Haykin and Ian Hugh Clary, 'Baptist Marriage in the Seventeenth

Stennett's *Discourses* considered the family from multiple angles. His first three discourses were of a general nature, addressing the duties of benevolence, family religion in general, and family worship. From there, Stennett moved on to household duties rooted in particular relationships. His outline followed the basic structure of Ephesians 5:22–6:9 as he spoke first of the duties of husbands and wives, then of parents and children, and finally, of masters and servants. The final four discourses addressed specific topics related to the family, including domestic friendship, hospitality, and heaven considered as a family. Space prohibits outlining each discourse in this work so the following sections will highlight Stennett's key themes.

The Importance of Family Religion

Samuel Stennett held a high view of the family and its potential to shape society as a whole. In his first three discourses in particular, he contended that the private happenings of domestic life impacted public welfare. As such, Stennett concluded, 'It is the duty and interest of everyone to contribute what lies in his power to the general good.'³⁰ His concern for the family was in part, therefore, rooted in his concern for the nation. Stennett noted that the family is, after all, 'a little society.'³¹ Therefore, the presence or absence of religion in the home was significant. If England was to be a nation that honoured God, the Lord must be esteemed in British families.

Stennett understood the burden of this responsibility to rest primarily on the father. In 'Family Religion in General,' he listed five general duties of the heads of houses: to look after the morals of their families, to instruct them in principles of religion, to regularly practice family worship, to oblige them toward the regular attendance of public worship, and to set a holy and pious example.³² Stennett was so confident of the influence of a godly father that he concluded, 'If such were our tempers and conduct in the families over which we preside, there would be light in all our dwellings, and joy in every heart there; our houses would be schools of virtue, temples of devotion, and nurseries of heaven.'³³

Of particular importance to Stennett was the maintenance of regular family worship, a subject to which he devoted an entire discourse. After addressing several reasons why families should offer daily prayer and praise to God, he set forth a guide for doing so. Stennett first urged families to consider the proper time for worship in their home, taking

and Eighteenth Centuries: Talking, Thinking, and Truth,' *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 3.1 (2012): pp. 28–40.

³⁰ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 13.

³¹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 55.

³² Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 59–70.

³³ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 72.

into account professional responsibilities, health, and other circumstances that would impact consistency. He avoided prescribing a particular length of time for family worship, but advised families to avoid rushing through the exercise on the one hand or tediously belabouring it on the other. In general, Stennett suggested that fifteen to twenty minutes in both the morning and the evening would be sufficient for most families.³⁴ As for the service itself, he recommended three main elements: the reading of Scripture, the offering of praise, and prayer for specific needs in the family. Within these general categories, Stennett placed less emphasis on what should be done in family worship than on the manner in which it should be carried out. He urged fathers in particular:

When you go down on your knees, remember that you are in the presence of Almighty God, that you are the representative as it were of your whole family, and that the proper or improper discharge of this duty will be likely to have an important effect on their temper and conduct.³⁵

Even so, he also noted the duty of all members of the family to be present and attentive at family worship, unless they were providentially hindered.

Finally, Stennett answered three typical objections to family worship: that it is uncommon, inconvenient, and that a father may feel unqualified to lead it.³⁶ Here, the pastor returned to his previous arguments for the practice of family worship as a duty before God and encouraged men to start the practice by simply giving thanks before meals. Stennett clearly considered family worship to be of great importance, evidenced by the amount of instruction he provided for it as well as the pastoral urgency with which he addressed fathers on the matter. He understood that consistent family worship did not guarantee the piety of the household, but he also knew its power in the hands of God. Thus, he concluded, 'Where the heads of families do, upon principle, maintain regularly the worship of God in their houses, we may be bold to affirm vice will not reign triumphant there.'³⁷

Samuel Stennett on Marriage

Stennett recognised that aside from the regular practice of family worship, a godly home also required order and authority. Thus, these themes permeated his discussion of household relationships. In his discourse on the duties of husbands and wives, he described marriage according to the standards of Scripture. It was God who created marriage and

³⁴ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 96.

³⁵ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 98.

³⁶ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 103.

³⁷ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 91.

therefore, only he has the authority to define it. Thus, Stennett described the marriage union as ‘the result of a solemn contract between one man and one woman to live together as husband and wife till death shall part them,’ as God had instituted in the beginning.³⁸

Within this definition, Stennett emphasised four points: marriage is monogamous, the parties must be competent for the commitment being made, the contract should be duly attested, and only death and adultery can dissolve the union.³⁹ While one can detect contemporary controversies behind Stennett’s second and third points, the issue of monogamy was clearly his central concern. As such, he focused the majority of his time on the subject demonstrating how both the law of nature and the law of Christ prohibit bigamy.⁴⁰

Before outlining the specific duties of husbands and wives toward one another, Stennett set forth a guide for ‘the forming [of] this important connection’ due to how much ‘the right discharge of these duties, and the happiness resulting thence, very much depend upon a correspondence of character, affections and circumstances between man and wife.’⁴¹ This particular section richly displays what characteristics the eighteenth century Baptist considered significant for the prospect of marriage.

First, Stennett recommended that individuals pursue marriage in an early period of life in order to maximise their interest in one another and to avoid the temptations of single life. People tended to marry in their late twenties in Britain at the time and yet, Stennett recommends that a person pursue marriage at the age when mankind generally considers them *sui juris*.⁴² Also of note is Stennett’s recommendation for young people to consider the ‘concurrence of parents and friends.’⁴³ While he did not approve of arranged unions, he still encouraged consulting the wisdom of parents in making such an important decision, reflecting his correspondence with contemporary views on parents and children.

³⁸ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 112.

³⁹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 113.

⁴⁰ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 114–125. Bigamy was a knotty issue in England at the time. Loose legal restrictions enabled individuals to marry more than one person if they chose to do so. Although the practice was formally illegal, bigamy was relatively common and some even argued that it should be socially acceptable. Stennett and other Baptists who spoke out against it in their day were likely eager to distance themselves from such views that were held by some more radical Anabaptists. For more on this issue, see Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, p. 40.

⁴¹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 126.

⁴² Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753 required parental permission for marriage of children under the age of 21, thus, Stennett was contending for young people to pursue marriage in their early twenties.

⁴³ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 127.

However, 'what demands the principal attention of those who mean to form this connection,' Stennett wrote, 'is the subsistence of a sincere friendship and cordial affection between themselves.'⁴⁴ While Stennett clearly called for order in the home and authority within the relational structures, he did not consider this to be at the expense of genuine care for one another. This was a consistent theme throughout his treatment of the marriage relationship and, of course, in his discourse on domestic friendship.⁴⁵

With that in mind, Stennett set forth five matters of prudence for an individual to consider in assessing a potential spouse. The first and foremost was religion, with regard to which he encouraged young people to focus on their own piety before evaluating the spirituality of others. He considered this period of life to be particularly advantageous for spiritual growth and also bemoaned, 'How sad a sight [it is] to see a young person launching out on the ocean of life without compass or rudder to steer by!'⁴⁶ In regard to choosing a spouse, Stennett challenged young people to not only marry a Christian but also to seek 'a uniformity of sentiment and practice in the mode of professing it.'⁴⁷ Similarly, he offered guidance for finding a good match in natural temper, good sense, worldly circumstances, and external accomplishments.⁴⁸

Samuel Stennett on Husbands and Wives

Having established these guidelines for pursuing marriage, Stennett moved on to address particular 'reciprocal duties of husbands and wives,' which he summarised under the general headings of 'love on the part of the husband' and 'reverence on the part of the wife.'⁴⁹ In the following pages, Stennett fleshed out the individual actions that stem from domestic affection and obedience to the commands of God.

As can be seen in the following quote, Stennett considered romantic love central to marriage and held a high view of its power for sustaining the relationship:

We may be sure a passion thus kindled in [the husband's] breast will not languish and die away; it will rise into a steady, inextinguishable flame—a flame which the endearing intercourses of virtuous friendship will daily fan, and the most tempestuous storms of worldly adversity will not be able to put out. [His wife's] character he will esteem and honour, her

⁴⁴ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 126.

⁴⁵ This discourse can be found at Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 326–376.

⁴⁶ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 128.

⁴⁹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 136.

interests civil and religious will lie near his heart, and to her person he will feel a firm and unalterable attachment.⁵⁰

Thus, the husband's love for his wife should motivate him to care for her and their family well. And even if he fails, Stennett argued, love can overcome. 'If, in time, a cross accident at any time occasions a sally of the passions, love will quickly repress the heat, and by renewed expressions of tenderness add strength to a friendship which no adverse circumstance can dissolve.'⁵¹ Stennett considered love a given within marriage, rather than advising his audience in how to cultivate affection. He spoke of love as if it could both fuse two people together and hold them intact against all challenges. In doing so, he showed himself to be very much a man of his times.⁵² Stennett called husbands to an ardent love of their wives, which he rooted in both the indissoluble bond created by marriage and the example of Christ and the church.⁵³

As for the wife, Stennett would have her to respect her husband and support him faithfully. Husbands ought not to demand such reverence, but rather the wife should joyfully highlight his qualities, cover his faults, and 'yield to his will, where conscience is not concerned.'⁵⁴ Such respect is 'a tribute not exacted on his part, but cheerfully rendered on hers.'⁵⁵ In this way, 'Esteem and affection will be so blended in her breast that her sweet and respectful demeanour towards him...will strike every observer as the soft impulse of nature, rather than the result of studied prudence.'⁵⁶ Such reverence will become natural as it comes 'flowing from love.'⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 137.

⁵¹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 137.

⁵² The concept of romantic affection was flourishing in eighteenth century England. The popular Anglican work, *The New Whole Duty of Man*, illustrated the general attitudes of society in arguing that marriage 'cannot be enterprised with any hopes of felicity, without a real affection on the one side, and a good assurance of it on the other.' [Richard Allestree?], *The New Whole Duty of Man* (1658; repr., Trenton: James Oram, 1809), p. 242. Although published anonymously, most scholars attribute it to Richard Allestree (1619–1681). This popular devotional was reprinted throughout the eighteenth century.

⁵³ The reference to Christ and the church is not in the immediate context of the previous quotations but comes, rather, at the end of the discourse. Speaking of Christ's love for his bride, Stennett concluded, 'Impressed with a deep sense of this unparalleled instance of friendship and benignity, ought not your breasts to glow with an affection towards your wives, resembling that which bears to you?' Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 140.

⁵⁵ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 140.

⁵⁷ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 140.

Thus, the relationship of the husband and his wife should be founded on mutual love expressed through reciprocal duties to one another.

One of Stennett's unique contributions in this work was his emphasis on domestic friendship, a subject which received the attention of a full discourse. Stennett pointed out that God instituted marriage, 'not only for the increase of the species, but for the purpose of promoting their mutual happiness, and that of their offspring.'⁵⁸ Thus, within the family one should expect that 'friendship should prevail here in the highest degree it is capable of being enjoyed in the present state.'⁵⁹ He then went on to describe various expressions of domestic friendship as well as suggestions for improving relationships within the home.⁶⁰ Noteworthy in Stennett's treatment of this subject was that he expected all members of the household to be involved in genuine friendships with one another. This is an important caveat for his prior statements regarding order and authority. For Stennett, the presence of authority and specific roles in the home does not preclude the opportunity for affectionate relationships to exist between husband and wife and even parent and child.

Samuel Stennett on Parents and Children

Turning to the relationship of parents and children, Stennett again envisioned structure and order. Children are to obey their parents, revere their character, and support them as needed, especially at the end of life.⁶¹ Stennett's description of the duties of children to their parents mirrors John Gill's discussion of the same subject, suggesting that Stennett perhaps developed this section alongside Gill's *Practical Divinity*.⁶²

Parents, in turn are charged with training their children by 'consulting their capacities, instilling virtuous principles into them, catechising them,' alluring them to cheerfully attend worship, educating them, and 'settling them in life.'⁶³ Stennett proposed a creative pattern for balancing the responsibilities of raising children between the spouses. He suggested that a child's first seven years should be spent primarily with his mother because 'nature hath endowed the female sex with such tenderness of disposition and warmth of affection, as admirably qualifies them for all the painful,

⁵⁸ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 327.

⁵⁹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 327.

⁶⁰ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 363–370.

⁶¹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 207.

⁶² Compare Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 202–203 with John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (1770; repr. Paris, Ark.: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2000), p. 977. Stennett does not plagiarise Gill's words, but the flow of thought is so similar that Stennett was almost certainly basing this paragraph on Gill or some other common source used by both men.

⁶³ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 160.

but to them pleasing duties of nurturing and rearing their young.⁶⁴ Once that foundation is properly laid, the next seven years should be spent under the primary guidance of the father, whose ‘authority, knowledge, and experience qualify him for a kind of exertion’ that is necessary.⁶⁵ During the final seven years (ages 15–21) of childhood, parents should jointly focus on educating their children and helping prepare them for the responsibilities of independent adulthood.

Stennett placed particular emphasis on the need for parents to properly educate their children, a duty which he felt was shamefully neglected in his day. Interestingly, Stennett departed from John Gill on the issue of catechising. Whereas Gill questioned the legitimacy of training children to memorise Scripture and prayers before their conversion, Stennett called for it and even answered some of Gill’s objections to the practice. Stennett’s logic can be observed in the following quote:

But there are others who tell us that...it is the office [of the Holy Spirit] to enlighten the understanding, and renew the heart; and the work ought not to be taken out of his hand...The grace of God, it is true, is necessary to renew the heart. But this grace is exerted in a manner perfectly agreeable with our frame and construction as reasonable creatures. We have the means of divine knowledge, the Scriptures, and we are required to read, consider, and search them; and in such use of our Bible we may hope to receive divine illumination. But, because without such illumination our study of them will be vain and fruitless, are we justified in wholly neglecting the use of them?⁶⁶

Stennett went on to assert that history demonstrated the value of catechising children. Even when children forsake religion in their youth, many report that ‘their former speculative acquaintance with the truths of Christianity is of no small use to them’ when they return to the faith.⁶⁷ This conversation illustrates some of the diversity that existed among Particular Baptists of the eighteenth century on issues of family life.

⁶⁴ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 157.

⁶⁵ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 159.

⁶⁶ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 172. Gill discouraged the use of catechisms and the memorisation of creedal statements prior to conversion. For more, see Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, p. 980.

⁶⁷ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 173. Conversely, Gill argued that children who had learned to recite the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer prior to their conversion would need to be untaught so that they would not trust in outward displays of religion. Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, p. 980.

A Preview of Heaven

A final aspect of Stennett's vision for the family that must be noted was the way in which he envisioned the family as a preview of heaven. According to Stennett, because the Scriptures use the language of families to describe the blessings of heaven, families can uniquely prepare individuals for their heavenly dwelling. While earth is not the Christian's ultimate home, every believer will make a home here. Therefore, Christians should strive to make their homes as 'heavenly' as possible. Stennett's description of the model home, while admittedly idealistic, serves as a helpful summary of his vision for the Christian family:

The father was a wise, affectionate, good man; a sincere disciple of the meek and lowly Jesus, whose doctrine he professed, and whose example he followed...The welfare of those entrusted to his care, lay near his heart, and...The counsels of divine wisdom...were sweetly mingled with the most pleasing expressions of paternal tenderness and love...The partner of his life, inexpressibly dear to him, had all the charms which virtue and religion could add to a form that commanded admiration and love. She was modest, prudent, and kind...Their children...inherited the virtues of their parents...and as the powers of reason expanded, the seeds of religion, which had been carefully sown in their breasts, sprung up under a divine influence, and promised a fair and joyful harvest.⁶⁸

As Stennett pointed out, there are numerous blessings to living in a well-ordered home:

Following the simple dictates of nature, [the family] acquired and preserved health; living on good terms with their neighbours, they secured themselves peace; cultivating domestic affections, they enjoyed a flow of innocent and enlivening pleasure; improving their opportunities for contemplation and discourse, they grew in wisdom and virtue; and conversing daily with heaven in the duties of religion, they were gradually prepared for the sublime services and joys of that better world.⁶⁹

That final sentence is the key to understanding Stennett's vision for the family. He called for a well-ordered home because he believed in the family's ability to gradually prepare its members for a better home to come. Near the end of this discourse, he proclaimed,

A family, a pious family [such as this], is methinks a shadow, of which heaven is the substance. Visit the pleasant mansion wherein the God of

⁶⁸ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, pp. 447–449.

⁶⁹ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 450.

grace deigns to dwell, and say whether you are not struck at your very entrance with this prophetic inscription written in fair characters upon it: This is the gate of heaven.⁷⁰

As Stennett neared the final years of his life (he was in his late fifties when *Domestic Duties* was published), the seasoned pastor no doubt reflected on the home he had grown up in and the godly heritage that preceded him. He recognised that he had been graced with a foretaste of heaven in his own family and he longed for others to know that blessing as well. He also knew that a reunion awaited him. He was reminded of this fact by Dr Gill at his father's funeral two decades prior and, in what must have been a sweet providence to Stennett, he was able to comfort Gill's own relatives with this same hope when their beloved passed. Following Gill's death, Stennett spoke a word of encouragement to Gill's family that echoed the Doctor's own sentiments: 'Let not your sorrow exceed...[but] while you often call to mind the excellent counsels he hath given you, and are walking in the path he trod, comfort yourselves with the joyful and transporting prospect of meeting him again, ere long, in the realms of light and glory above.'⁷¹

This was Samuel Stennett's vision for the family: a place where spirituality could blossom as one generation passed down faithfulness to the next and exemplified the fruit of religion. In such a home, even death could not rob its residents of hope. For death was only a temporary parting. Thus, Stennett called his readers to organise their families around the dictates of Scripture, not only for the benefits that they would experience in this life but also, for the blessing of preparation for the life to come. This is surely a vision worth pursuing in our own day.

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⁷⁰ Stennett, *Domestic Duties*, p. 469.

⁷¹ Stennett, *Works*, 3:175.

